

Christopher Graham

House Bill 5193

Opposed

I am writing today to express my opposition to House Bill 5193.

The Speaker encouraged me as a Rhode Island business leader to reach out directly to the Committee stating my concerns.

I serve on the Board of Directors of the Greater Providence Chamber of Commerce and am the Chair of its Education Committee. The Committee recently voted without opposition to oppose the moratorium on charter school expansion (i.e., House Bill 5193), as did the GPCC's Board of Directors. I submit this testimony on the Committee's behalf.

I also serve as a member of the Board of Directors of Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council, a member of the Rhode Island Foundation's Long Term Education Planning Committee, a member of the Board of Directors and Executive Committee of Junior Achievement of RI and the Chair of the Regional Advisory Board of Teach for America/RI. I am also the Office Managing Partner of the Providence Office of Locke Lord LLP, formerly known to many as Edwards & Angell. However, please accept that this testimony is on behalf of the GPCC's Education Committee and does not purport to be the viewpoint of my Firm or any of the other organizations I mentioned above. I refer to them all, not to boast, but to impress upon you that I care passionately about the education of Rhode Island's children.

Improving all of our schools to a level approaching those of Massachusetts is the single most effective economic development tool we could ever have. To bring higher wage jobs to Rhode Island, we must have better schools that produce better graduates with significantly higher levels of proficiency. We have to stay the course on reforms we have recently enacted and keep striving to provide the best education possible to all of our citizens, regardless of wealth, race, gender, ability or religion.

While no rational person opposes any of these goals, please understand that almost 30 years ago, a blue ribbon panel critiqued what was happening in our urban core schools. Nothing short of a crisis the panel effectively concluded. In response, the State authorized charter schools and later took a hard look at the funding formula, attempting to improve the formula equitably. In 2019, Johns Hopkins presented its report. Nothing short of a disaster the report effectively repeated. If you read the two reports, their observations and conclusions are shockingly similar. Sadly, over the last 30 years, no significant progress has been made in the ELA or Math proficiencies in our urban core traditional public schools and the school culture and morale appears to have deteriorated during that period. That really means that more than two generations of school children have cycled through our educational system without a fair chance at improving their lives. The single bright light that shines is the proficiency levels at many of our charter schools. It strikes me as profoundly unfair, inequitable and sad that we might pause and defer for three more years, and possibly beyond, the hope of families that their children might gain the education so desperately desired, when for 30 years our traditional public schools have done so little to better their performance and in fact may well have regressed.

I am not contending that all charter schools are successful, and I have no objection to our elected representatives asking hard questions about what the data reveals as to performance, whether or not charter schools outperform traditional public schools, what methods used by charter schools are working, what methods are not. But there is no reason to pause charter growth for 3 years while these questions are studied and considered. We need to continue to act boldly. We cannot wait. Before you vote on this legislation, I encourage you to reflect on how much your own children grow over the course of three years- intellectually, physically, emotionally, socially- and then ask yourself if you can take three more years of growth from urban core children. To retroactively rescind the Council's recent approval of new schools and expansion of existing schools is simply not justified under these tragic circumstances.

It's extremely troubling to think Rhode Island may want to turn its back on underserved Black and Latino families in order to study charter schools as the one positive outgrowth of a crisis that has been studied in depth twice over 30 years. It is, at its core, an insensitive decision that unfairly limits entire segments of our society. I hope you will give this careful thought and join me in opposition.

Thank you for your time, attention and consideration.